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Cut

de Riedmatten, Henri

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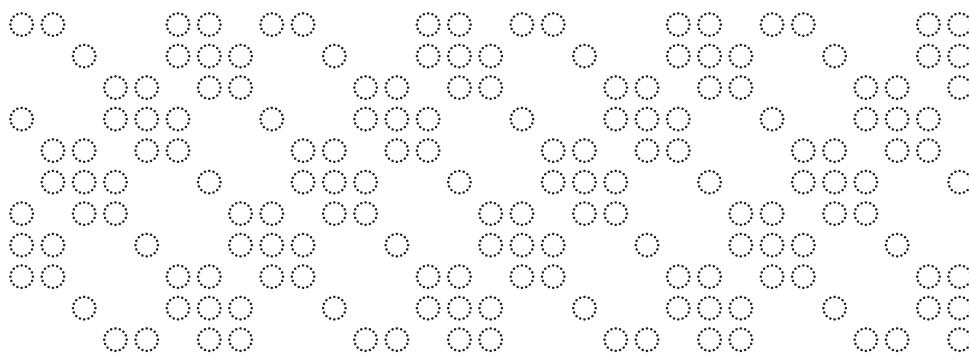
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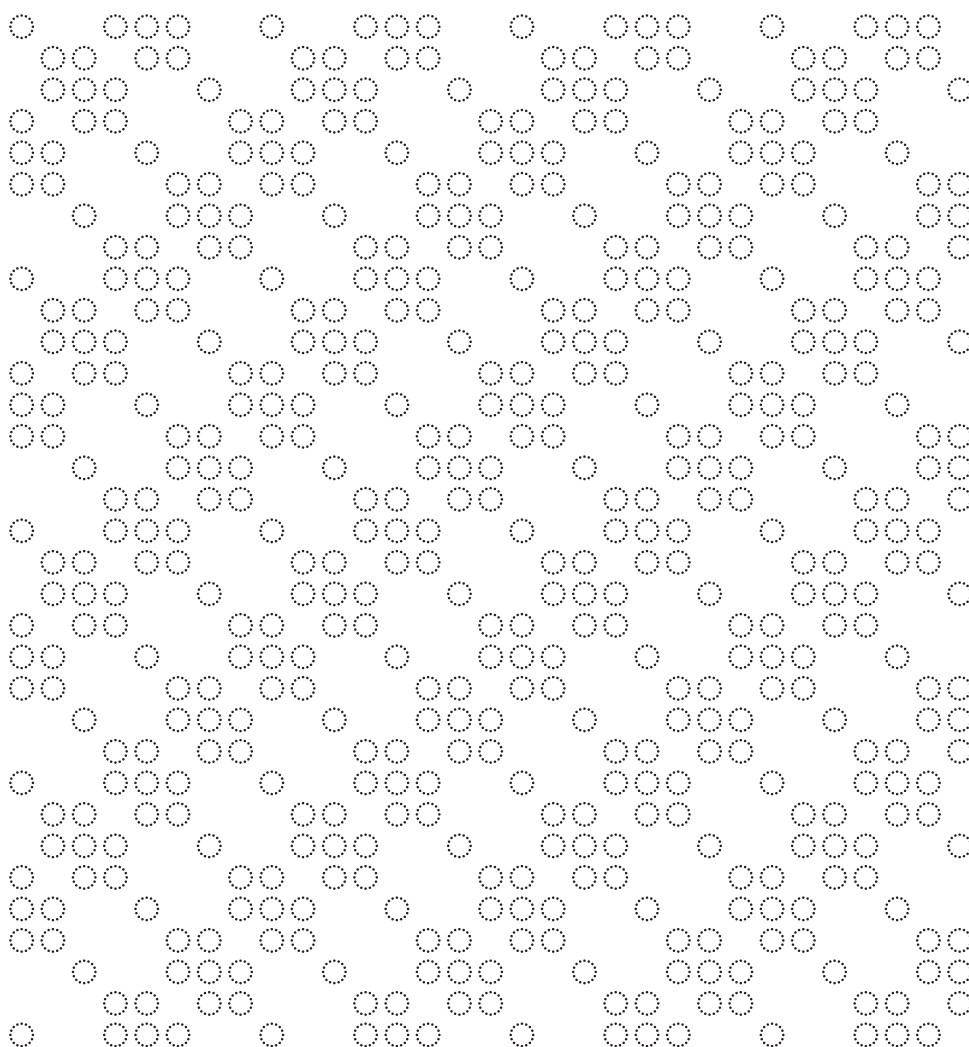
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TEXTILE TERMS: A GLOSSARY

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EDITION IMORDE

TEXTILE STUDIES 0



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Fig. 13 Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Lucretia*, 1666, oil on canvas, 110.17 × 92.28 cm, Minneapolis, Institute of Art, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 34.19.

They are three sisters, deities of generation and corruption, of birth and death. The first, Clotho (the Spinner), spins the thread of life; the second, Lachesis (Destiny/Random draw), unwinds it; and the third, Atropos (the Inflexible), cuts it (e.g., Hans Baldung Grien, *The Three Fates*, 1513, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art). The Moirai—literally, the portions of fate assigned to each human being—impart a measure of life to all mortals and determine its duration (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 217.904). When the time has come, Atropos, with his scissors, cuts the textile, linear, and stretched manifestation called existence. But some characters, it would appear, want to relieve her of this deadly act and perform the cut themselves. The execution may in that case be carried out with other sharp instruments and take the form, for example, of a penetrating cut.

Rembrandt's *Lucretia* is bleeding (fig. 13). She has just dealt herself a fatal blow. Her right hand holds the knife, which she has lowered to a resting rather than attacking position. Her left hand is closed, clenching a cord. Rembrandt does not show the wound as such caused by the stab into the flesh, but reveals it through a clever artifice: Lucretia's shirt is soaking up the blood gushing from her wound. The thin fabric, drenched with blood, sticks to the skin, forming two clearly visible vertical folds that delineate the wounded area. However, when looking closely at this impregnated surface, which is neither clothing nor skin anymore, one clearly sees the horizontal gash left by the blade that has cut into Lucretia's body. With this narrow slash, Rembrandt, in the most evocative of ways, reiterates the act of opening and physical violation that already characterized the rape of Lucretia (Bal 2006 [1991], 74–77). The body and the garment covering it have been slashed open. Their coalescence into an indistinct, indefinite fabric—the blood flowing from the one is absorbed by the other—is effectively the culmination of a dialogue echoed by other correlations within the painting. Indeed, the chain across Lucretia's chest dwells horizontally on the bloody stain before directing the gaze to the cut in the collar of her shirt; highlighted by two buttons, it opens lengthwise onto the woman's intact skin. The relationship between body and clothing is here expressed in terms of two distinct surfaces—textile and skin—one of which makes way, so to speak, for the other to become accessible. And although the aim is to introduce viewers into the physical intimacy of the sitter, the clothing opens onto a closed body. This distinction forms a violent contrast to the merging that occurs just beneath it: a double penetration of the surfaces resulting in an indistinct and opaque space, neither entirely body nor entirely garment—neither completely open nor completely closed. But these two areas, which

present two different modalities of interaction between the body and that which veils it, extend the dialogue further in that the one stops precisely where the other begins. They alternate with each other, continuously yet disjointedly, in the crossing of the chest. Their respective forms furthermore seem to mirror each other in a relationship of inversion, the result of a central symmetry organized around a point located between the buttoned strap and the gash. Beyond their geometrical relationship, these two elements are also connected by way of combination, to the extent that the button loop could be applied over the hole to «seal» the wound, thus closing what is open, as it were (Riedmatten 2013, 241–47).

The cut is a gesture with many variations, and while it can be at the center of a rhetoric of exposure of the pierced body, where clothing, skin, and blood succeed one other, it is also likely to occur in the context of an attack against an exclusively textile body—the canvas of a painting, for example—and thus embody the interaction between the artist and the medium. This kind of act differs from the textile tear among others because the sharp rupture of the threads causes a separation of the fabric that excludes any accident.

From 1958 until his death in 1968, Lucio Fontana created a large number of pictorial works whose surface is traversed by one or several vertical cuts, neat and regular *tagli*—by metonymy also the common name of these works, adopted by the artist himself. Their habitual and systematic title, *Concetto Spaziale, Attesa* («Spatial Concept, Waiting»), varies between singular and plural depending on the amount of *tagli* that Fontana has performed on the canvas (Crispolti 2006, 1:442). These openings direct the spectator's attention to the surface and its characteristics. They are also indicative of an event that might be more interesting than the result as such. Finally, they reflect a tension between the work and the creative process, as well as between matter and form (Lüthy 2015, 25). The cut is furthermore the result of a performative sequence, of a gesture that unfolds between the artist and the canvas. The act of cutting prevails over the material, as is indeed stated in the first manifesto (1947) of the Spatialist movement, of which Fontana was one of the signatories: «Art is eternal, but it cannot be immortal. . . . It might live one year or a thousand years, but the time of its material destruction will always come. It will remain eternal as a gesture, but it will die as matter» (Crispolti/Siligato 1998, 117–18).

The series of photographs made by Ugo Mulas in Fontana's studio in Milan perfectly illustrates the different moments that punctuate this poietic gesture: before attacking the canvas, Fontana examines the space of the painting, carefully considering the location and orientation of his incisions (*Lucio Fontana*, 1964, Milan, Archivio Ugo Mulas). This moment defines the pace and position of the constellation of caesurae, which, although they may resemble a material destruction of the canvas, constitute the work in aesthetic terms (Blistène 1987, 4–7; Lüthy 2015, 30–34). These cuts divide the space of the painting—like a brushstroke—but they are not confined to the arrangement of this space, as they pierce it, or open it up, as it were. The action of cutting here is a poietic manifestation, which, by penetrating the threshold of the cloth, reveals another space, which thus becomes immanent to the

image. In keeping with this rationale, the artist, very conspicuously, stretches a thin layer of black gauze behind the pierced parts of the canvas so as to prevent the wall behind the painting from becoming visible (Lüthy 2015, 32–33).

In the realm of fashion design and its constant mutations, the cut is the process that consists of cutting up cloth to obtain the pieces required for the assembly of a garment. The cut is performed according to a pattern that follows the outlines of a stencil. It can be unitary, for example in the production of a bespoke piece of clothing, where only one ply of fabric is cut at a time, traditionally using scissors (e.g., Giovanni Battista Moroni, *The Tailor*, ca. 1570, London, National Gallery). But particularly in the context of prêt-à-porter, which looks to achieve the most competitive production cost, entire bundles—stacks of several layers of cloth—are cut using automatic textile-cutting machines. These are equipped with a vertical blade or more recent techniques such as laser or water jets based on a system of computer-assisted design and manufacturing (CAD/CAM). These machines also allow for moving a cutting tool across the plane on which the bundle is placed (Remaury/Kamitsis 2004, 155).

But the cut can equally serve to deconstruct the garment and thus, in a logic of renouncement, to undress its wearer, to literally unveil him or her. *Cut Piece* (1964) by Yoko Ono acts as a manifesto in this regard. This work was publicly performed by the artist herself on at least six occasions between 1964 and 1966, and last in 2003. It was also performed—sometimes under the direction of Ono—by other female but also male performers, after the artist herself pointed out that «the performer . . . does not have to be a woman» (Ono 2000 [1964/70], n.p.; Harding 2012 [2010], 120). During the performance on March 21, 1965, at Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, the artist sat kneeling on stage wearing one of her finest dresses (despite the fact that she was far from rich at the time); a pair of scissors was placed on the floor in front of her. The members of the audience were invited to come on stage one after the other and cut off a portion of her clothing, which they were allowed to keep. This conceptual work, with its numerous implications, is the subject of countless interpretations to this day. In the same way that the audience was invited to cut and take what they wanted from the clothing, hermeneuts are invited to appropriate the work and give it the meaning they want. The reception of Ono's *Cut Piece* is therefore as varied as its audience: the artist herself, other performers, the spectators, and the critics have defined it in turn as a feminist, Buddhist, pacifist, Christian, poetic, or fetishist work, a striptease, a voyeuristic humiliation, an aesthetic manifestation of the concept of collage, etc. (Concannon 2008, 88–92; Harding 2012 [2010], 96–101). Yet the common thread linking these various readings, all compelling in their own right, is the relational nature of the gift in the shape of a textile offering: while the spectators step into the arena in order to cut, the condition of the performers, whoever they are, is to be cut, to let themselves be cut. The aim is in fact to give the public what it chooses to take, not what the performers choose to give it. However, this confrontation is not free from risk or underlying violence in that it has an impact in terms of textile or, in the worst case, physical destruction. Indeed,

during the first performance of the *Cut Piece* in 1964, in Kyoto, a man took to the stage and raised the scissors over Ono's head, threatening her for a long while as though intending to stab her (Stiles 2000, 158; Harding 2012 [2010], 112).

Naturally, the act of cutting cannot be reduced to the various instantiations described here, so to cut short a potentially endless debate, a (shamelessly distorted) proverb traditionally attributed to Beaumarchais might be called for: «Cut, cut! Something will always stick!»